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Chateau Ste. Michelle

It was the first week of January 2004, and the Walla Walla Valley had just been walloped by days of arctic blasts. Temperatures fell into the negative teens, battering vines already vulnerable from an earlier Halloween cold snap. The potential crop was decimated; estimates put losses at greater than 75 percent. Ted Baseler, President and CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, started making calls.

“Just a few days after, Ted contacted us,” says Jean-François Pellet of Pepper Bridge, “and asked if the damage was as bad as people were saying. When we told him yes, he offered to sell us fruit for the vintage. He wanted us to know that it was important for them and for Washington that our wines were in the market.” Without that extended hand, 2004 would have been a grim year for Pepper Bridge, Pellet says. “Fifty percent of our fruit came from them in 2004, maybe sixty.”

Ste. Michelle also sold grapes from their prime vineyards to Leonetti, L’Ecole No 41, and others. “It was not a big economic sacrifice,” says Baseler. “It just made good business sense. We’ve come at this with the spirit that we’ll only do as well as the region does. When you’re a smaller winery and you don’t have grapes, you don’t just lose a vintage, you might lose a placement on a wine list or space on a retail shelf, which is bad for all of us.”

As the oldest and one of the largest wine producers in Washington State, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates has long been a benefactor to the local industry, starting with grapes, and extending to expertise, marketing and talent. Many if not most of the prominent winemakers and winegrowers that have emerged in the last decade are alumni of Ste. Michelle, including Paul Champoux, Wade Wolfe, Dick Boushey, Bob Betz, Mike Januik, Erik Olsen, Ron Bunnell, Holly Turner and Charlie Hoppes.



While remaining an essential regional entity, Ste. Michelle has successfully launched international partnerships that carry its influence far beyond its home base in Woodinville, to Bernkastel and Florence, to the Napa and Willamette valleys. Its joint ventures with the Antinori family (Col Solare, and their recent joint purchase of Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars) and Weingut Dr. Loosen (Eroica) have bloomed into robust creative alliances, culminating in such high-profile programs as the Riesling Rendezvous, which for two years running has brought riesling producers from all over the world to Woodinville, to compare styles, compare notes, and generate worldwide interest in the grape.

Ste. Michelle Vintners was an outgrowth of a Seattle company called American Wine Growers (AWG), which was itself the merger of two wine companies, Pommerelle and the National Wine Company, both founded in 1934 and primarily devoted to the production of fruit wines. Vinifera plantings were minimal in Washington, though interest had grown to the point where the company thought it worthwhile to explore the prospect, planting its first riesling in 1965. Two years later, AWG founded Ste. Michelle Vintners and dedicated its production exclusively to vinifera varieties. According to Joel Klein, Ste. Michelle’s winemaker through much of the 1970s, it was AWG director Vic Allison’s daughter Vicki who suggested the name; she announced at a Sunday dinner that the company name would benefit from a little French flair.

Klein came to Washington at the suggestion of his friend and mentor André Tchelistcheff, with whom he had worked at Simi Winery. Tchelistcheff had a significant consultative role at Ste. Michelle in the early years, and recommended Klein for the winemaking position. Klein in turn asked the advice of his father-in-law Harold Berg, a former professor of enology at UC-Davis. He recalls Berg’s unequivocal response: “Joel,”



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MULTISOURCE

Founded: 1934
Winemakers: Bob Bertheau, Joshua Maloney, Wendy Stuckey
Acres owned: 3,500
Annual production: 1,700,000 cases
Estate grown: 40%
Owner: Ste. Michelle Wine Estates
Known for: The riesling leader of Washington State
Location: Woodinville, WA
Website: ste-michelle.com

he said, ‘if I were your age, I’d take it in a moment. The future of the wine business is north.’”

By the time Klein arrived in 1974, plantings had commenced in earnest. Early efforts with whites, both chenin blanc and riesling, were met with considerable success—in fact, a 1972 bottling of Ste. Michelle Johannisberg Riesling took first prize in a blind tasting of rieslings from around the world held at the *Los Angeles Times* in 1974, vaulting Ste. Michelle into the national spotlight.

Riesling defined those early years in Washington State, but red wines have dominated plantings since the mid-1980s. Judging from the recent success of riesling in the state—where Ste. Michelle is by far its largest producer—that pendulum may swing back again.

Ste. Michelle now farms more than 3,500 acres of vines, from Yakima to Walla Walla, and increasingly north of the Wahluke Slope, (which has proved to be a great source of riesling—it provides much of the fruit for Eroica). Four vineyards compose more than half of the firm’s total acreage: Cold Creek (the prime source for the 2004 Col Solare blend), just south of the Wahluke Slope; Indian Wells, on the Wahluke Slope; and Canoe Ridge and Horse Heaven vineyards, both in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA. Kevin Corliss, director of viticulture, maintains these extensive vineyards and is working with Oregon’s LIVE program to gain sustainable farming certification by 2010.

Bob Bertheau leads Ste. Michelle’s winemaking team, working with red-winemaker Joshua Maloney, and white-winemaker Wendy Stuckey. It is no small feat to take a million-plus case winery and nudge it into a different direction. But after four years on the job, Bertheau clearly possesses a deeper understanding of the many components parts, and tier-by-tier, barrel-by-barrel, he’s been able to tweak the wines into clearer, more precise expressions of Washington State.

Ethos is a case in point. Just after Bertheau arrived at Ste. Michelle, the winery introduced this top-tier program. “Ethos was our fresh line in the sand,” says Bertheau. “It was our way to channel fresh winemaking ideas.” Perhaps, but in their debut vintage of 2003, the Ethos tier seemed to emphasize their reserve status by showing off lavish oak treatment and brooding structures, as if equating *ethos* (character) with *gravitas*. Bertheau admits he was still trying to get comfortable with the vicissitudes of Washington fruit. “Those wines were bigger and more obvious than I wanted,” he says. “They were like, ‘Hello! I’m here!’ But I’ve tried to ease back ever since.”

Vintage-by-vintage, he adjusted the mix in coopers and toasting regimes. He combined, and recombined woods from different forests and with different tones. He pursued slower, cooler fermentations to get at better integration. And as a result, the Ethos wines show more deftness of hand. “It’s become the place to try and find more complex statements in wine, to get away from the big and the obvious,” he says.

The change in direction is clear when you taste the 2005 Ethos Columbia Valley Chardonnay, with fruit drawn from Canoe Ridge and Cold Creek vineyards. A departure from most Washington chardonnays, this wine displays a lightness and a fineness of tone that has been largely absent until recently, with light leesy, savory scents that complement a shot of pure pear flavor.

So it is with an industry leader like Ste. Michelle: sometimes you lead by extending a hand; sometimes you lead by example. —P.J. Comiskey

TOP-SCORING WINES

- 93** '06 Eroica Columbia Valley Riesling \$22 (12/07)
- 93** '04 Col Solare Columbia Valley \$70 (2/08)
- 92** '05 Columbia Valley Ethos Chardonnay \$32 (12/07)